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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/25/2016

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SUBJECT: SYRIAN WOMEN FLOCKING TO MUSLIM MOVEMENT

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4 b/d

¶1. (C) Summary: A Syrian Muslim women's movement, the Qubaisis, is attracting attention for its apparently increasing social and political influence. The movement, which reportedly has 75,000 members in Syria with branches regionally and in the United States, promotes traditional Islamic values in loosely organized study groups and schools.

In Syria, members are recruited from influential Sunni families and include the wives of businessmen and high-placed politicians, according to our contacts. Ameera Jibril, who is the sister of PFLP-GC head Ahmed Jibril, is in the leadership of the movement, one source said. Founded by Syrian woman Munira Qubaisi, the movement is reportedly heavily influenced by a strain of Sufism that promotes withdrawal from worldly affairs, according to our sources. Even so, Syrian authorities have long monitored Munira Qubaisi and have sought to control her movement, which seems to provide women an opening to organize in a socially and religiously-sanctioned, albeit very conservative way. End Summary.

¶2. (C) WHAT IS IT: The Qubaisi movement was founded by a Syrian woman, Munira Qubaisi, and includes up to 75,000 followers in Syria, with branches in Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Australia and the United States, according to Damascus-based Al-Hayat correspondent Ibrahim Hamidi, who has followed the development of the movement over the past year. The organization's female followers meet regularly in private homes in loosely-organized groups, to study the Koran and other religious works and to emphasize the importance of good morals, said Hamidi who unsuccessfully sought a meeting with the extremely reclusive Qubaisi herself.

¶3. (C) Women's rights activist Daad Mousa said that the group teaches housewives about traditional issues such as child-rearing and basic religious education and assists younger women in obtaining good jobs and marriages. The Qubaisi movement is also involved in running private elementary and middle schools, which are very affordable and renowned for teaching good morals, including the al-Bawader (pioneers) school in Damascus, Hamidi said. According to Islamist MP and Islamic Studies Center head Mohammed Habash, the Qubaisis have at least a hundred schools in the Damascus area.

¶4. (C) HOW IS IT ORGANIZED: In Syria, some members are recruited from influential Sunni families and include the wives of businessmen and senior politicians, according to our contacts. Mousa stated that the Qubaisi movement was particularly strong in Aleppo, which is generally considered more religiously conservative than Damascus. Potential young

recruits are showered with attention, for example, seated next to the leader of their study group, and some hold fancy parties to celebrate initiates' donning of the hijab, according to contacts and a handful of media reports. The movement is highly hierarchical, with members rising through the ranks based on their age and seniority, according to several contacts. Members' attire reflects their status, according to contacts, who repeated unconfirmed anecdotes of new recruits garbed in navy blue hijabs and the most senior members clothed in black.

15. (C) Qubaisi has several "lieutenants," including Nuhaida Trakji, Khaireiyah Jiha and Ameera Jibril, who is the sister of PFLP-GC leader Ahmed Jibril, according to Sheikh Salah Kuftaro, whose father, the grand mufti of Syria until his death in 2004, provided support and guidance to Munira Qubaisi in her youth, as did his father before him.

(Comment: It is unclear to what extent Kuftaro's Abu Noor Islamic Institute or other established Islamic organizations in Syria exercise any influence on Qubaisi or her legion of followers. End Comment.) Qubaisi and many of her lieutenants are unmarried, Hamidi said. Despite the movement's hierarchical nature, Munira Qubaisi cannot transmit instructions directly to members of Qubaisi study groups because they operate independently from one another, Hamidi said.

16. (C) RELIGION AND POLITICS: The movement is reportedly heavily influenced by Sufism, including the Nakshbandi tradition, which emphasizes the withdrawal of spiritual leaders from worldly affairs, according to our contacts. Indeed, Qubaisis can spend up to 25 years without ever seeing Munira Qubaisi, Hamidi said. Other contacts suggested that the Qubaisis are also influenced by Sunni Islamic fundamentalist Wahabi thought, which is strong in Saudi

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Arabia where Qubaisi spent many years.

17. (C) Qubaisi was heavily influenced in her youth by Amin Kuftaro and, later, his son Ahmad Kuftaro, who founded the Abu Noor Institute in Damascus, according to Ahmad Kuftaro's son, Sheikh Salah Kuftaro. Qubaisi first studied biology in the 1950s and then Islamic Studies in the 1960s at the University of Damascus where she became influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood, Kuftaro said. Sometime after that, Ba'ath Party authorities ordered her out of the country, and she chose to continue her work in Saudi Arabia until banned by officials there in the mid-1980s, Kuftaro said. Qubaisi successfully sought Sheikh Ahmad Kuftaro's help to return to Damascus where she continued her preaching under the cover of the Abu Noor Institute to avoid prosecution, Salah Kuftaro said. Two years ago, Syria's then-Chief of State Security Branch of the General Intelligence Directorate Bahjat Suleiman sought an evaluation of the Qubaisis from Kuftaro, who said he characterized the group as a spontaneous movement without a political agenda that should be permitted to lecture in mosques under the authorities' supervision. Two female Syrian-American journalists in Damascus, who have sought unsuccessfully to attend Qubaisi sessions, noted that their female family members who belong to other Islamic study groups are concerned almost to the point of paranoia about the need to avoid being followed by members of the security services.

18. (C) There are some signs that the movement has an indirect, but powerful influence on Syrian society and politics, perhaps in part due to its leading members' family connections. One story making the rounds in Damascus says that several senior Qubaisis were arrested in November for preaching without permission but were then released within hours after Syrian President Bashar al-Asad was besieged with phone calls, according to a locally-based U.S. journalist and think-tank fellow who is also working on an article about the movement. Although this story could not be confirmed, Abu Noor Institute leader Sheikh Salah Kuftaro said that the

Syrian Minister for Religious Trusts recently issued licenses to five Qubaisis to give lessons in Damascus mosques. Kuftaro said that security authorities objected to the decision, but the Minister said he obtained the clearance from high-level officials, including Asad's office director, presumably acting at the President's direction. For the most part, Munira Qubaisi has refrained from making direct political statements, although some say in the past 18 months she has commented favorably about the SARG, Hamidi said.

¶9. (C) According to women's rights activist Mousa, the Qubaisis and the Ba,ath Party use a similar line regarding women's issues: "Our laws are righteous and promote equality; women just have to be educated on these rights." The Qubaisis frame their teachings to educate women on their rights within Islam, as a religion that they say promotes gender equality. They focus on, for example, topics like a wife's rights in her marriage contract, or discussions about the acts and roles of the Prophet's wives in the Hadith (the collective body of traditions relating to Mohammed and his companions), Mousa said. The focus remains on the most basic rights and does not promote critical thinking about the religion, Mousa asserted. An aggrieved Qubaisi would not divorce her husband but instead, armed with her newfound knowledge of Islamic law, would accuse him of not holding up an aspect of the marriage contract or (in the case of polygamy) Koranic requirements, Mousa said. Indeed some contacts cited anecdotes about husbands who divorced their wives after they became too religious.

¶10. (C) Comment: The SARG's blessing for Munira Qubaisi's return to Syria in the 1980s, after its massive military operations to crush the Muslim Brotherhood, fits into its broader campaign to curry favor with Syria's Sunni majority. Forty years after Qubaisi was banished from Syria, it is not clear what if any relationship she has with the Muslim Brothers. The apparent popularity of her movement, however, is another sign of rising Islamic fervor here that has occurred over the last two decades.

¶11. (C) Comment continued: It is difficult to know the extent of the Qubaisis' power, but, based on anecdotes about the organization, it clearly has some social and political influence. It is noteworthy that in a country where political and religious activities are closely monitored and controlled, some women are organizing and making connections in a socially and religiously-sanctioned way, to some extent beyond the regime's reach. A few contacts argue that the

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movement has within it the seeds of women's empowerment that could advocate from within Islam's deeply conservative traditions for greater rights and freedoms for Muslim women. Given the apparently aggressively traditional religious visions of the Qubaisis, however, it seems unlikely that the movement would take such a direction.

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